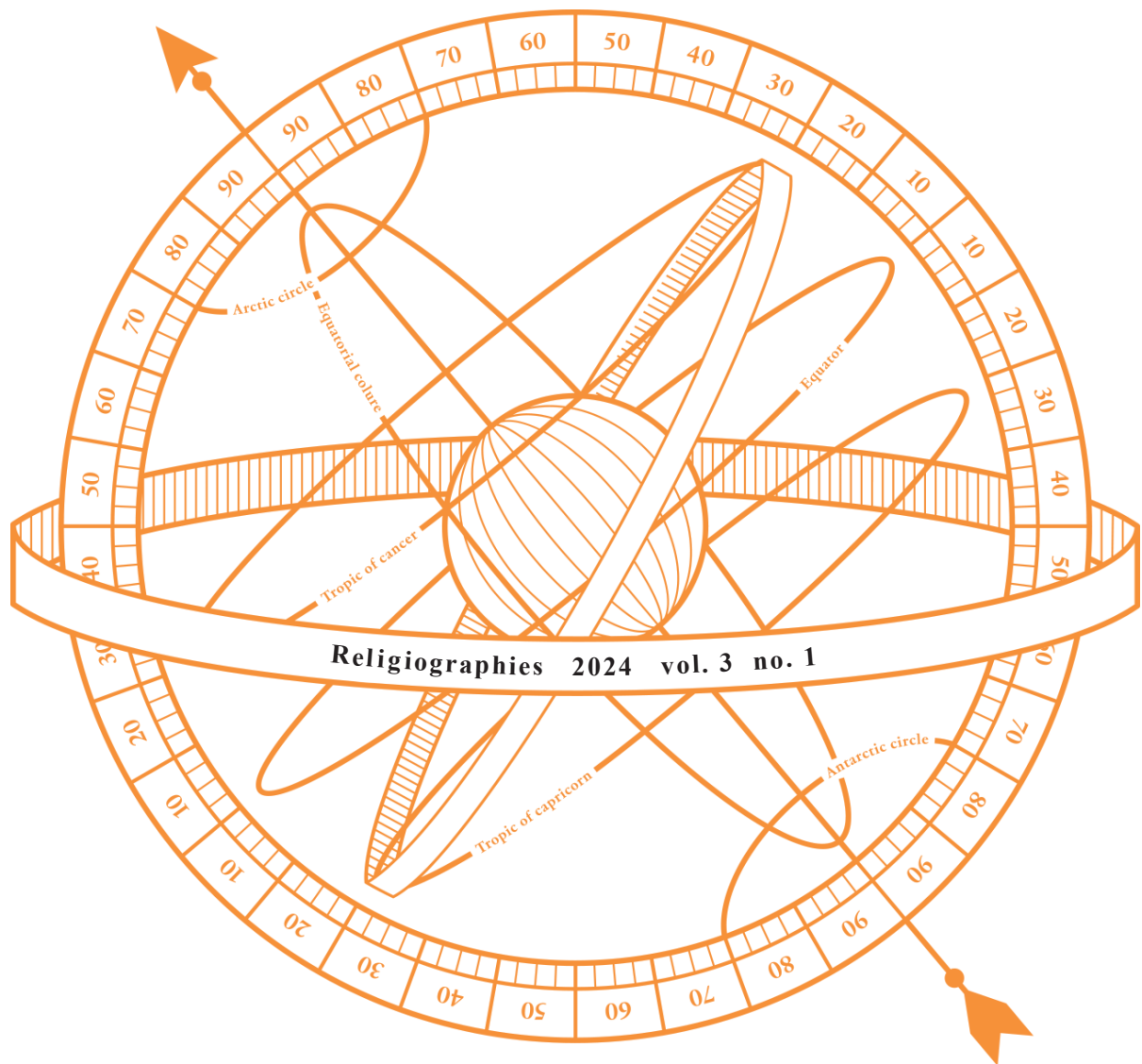


Religiographies



Special Issue

“Zoroastrian Esotericism”

edited by

Mariano Errichiello, Daniel J. Sheffield, and Yuhan
Sohrab-Dinshaw Vevaina

Forbidden Ecstasy: Pre-Zoroastrian and Zoroastrian Esotericism in Iranian Black Metal

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Keywords:

Zoroastrianism, Black metal, Iran,
Transgression, Neopaganism, Esoteri-
cism

To cite this:

Eckerström, Pasqualina. "Forbidden Ecstasy: Pre-Zoroastrian and Zoroastrian Esotericism in Iranian Black Metal." *Religiographies*, vol. 3, no. 1 (2024): 92–107.

Abstract

Charuk Revan and Magus Faustoos are two Iranian artists who have pioneered the Iranian Black metal scene, using their music to promote Zoroastrianism and pre-Zoroastrian esotericism. Unfortunately, their passion for music led them to flee Iran, where they faced severe persecution for their art. Magus, a musician with a PhD in Theology, was imprisoned and tortured for his work, while Charuk, a female Black metal artist raised in an Azeri family, was forced to leave Iran when her music and psychology school was shut down by the government. Today, they reside in Germany as political refugees. While Western Black metal often incorporates ancient legends and esoteric traditions, musicians in religiously authoritarian countries face severe penalties for doing so. In Iran, Black metal is considered a sinful form of art. Magus and Charuk have a particular fascination with occult practices within Zoroastrianism and pre-Zoroastrianism wisdom. They aim to revive ancient Persian tales and mysticism by making use of a diverse range of traditional folk instruments and teachings that date back to the pre-Islamic era. They view their performances as an expression of the occult, an act of mystic transcendence shared with their audience. Other Iranian Black metal musicians often incorporate pre-Islamic Neopagan themes and practices, but scholars have yet to explore this connection. Through narrative interviews, I am investigating how Iranian Black metal musicians reinterpret, redefine, and revive Zoroastrian and pre-Zoroastrian esotericism while resisting the Iranian government.



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Introduction

Heavy metal music has both battled religion and danced with it. Alternative religions, and religious practices, have traditionally inspired bands at odds with organised religion.¹ Often, this association is promoted by conservatives, but it is no secret that some musicians have explicitly endorsed occult practices as well as Satanic and other anti-Abrahamic beliefs and practices through their music.²

The British band Black Sabbath pioneered heavy metal during the 1970s.³ Many subgenres followed, including Black metal. Based on contrasts between harshness and harmony to create dark atmospheres, Black metal is an extreme form of music. Bands belonging to the genre often wear black-and-white makeup known as corpse paint along with bullet belts, anti-religious symbols, studs, and weapons typical of medieval times.⁴ As part of their aggressive image, they promote pagan practices while rejecting Christianity.

Over the past few decades, scholars have paid considerable attention to the relationship between alternative religions and Scandinavian Black metal. Nevertheless, it is imperative to keep in mind that metal music, including Black metal, is a global phenomenon, popular even in contexts where playing it can lead to capital punishment. This is the case in Iran. Iranian Black metal artists engage in pre-Islamic traditions in the same way their Western counterparts promote pre-Christian practices. Consequently, the Iranian authorities consider their music blasphemous. In response, musicians use it as a form of resistance.

In Iran, this genre of music is illegal for a multitude of reasons: 1) the regime prohibits the production of metal music as a whole, 2) the promotion of non-Islamic beliefs is criminalised, and 3) the regime is worried about Iranians who are disenchanted with Islam and are turning to other religions, including Zoroastrianism.⁵ While the constitution recognises Zoroastrians as a religious minority, there have been many reports of oppression against them since the establishment of the Islamic Republic.⁶ Within this context, Black metal music becomes a powerful and dangerous tool against the Islamic Republic.

Among the most vocal Black metal artists from Iran are Magus and Charuk. Drawing inspiration from Zoroastrian and pre-Zoroastrian wisdom, including Mithraism, they view their performances as a representation of the occult and a manifestation of mystical transcendence, a transformative experience they endeavour to share with their audience by means of their music.

Through narrative interviews, this article examines how Iranian Black metal musicians use Zoroastrian and pre-Zoroastrian esotericism to resist the Iranian government.

Method

As a method of collecting data, narratives told during interviews have a long history and are very common in the social sciences.⁷ Currently, narrative studies are not confined to one scholarly discipline. In numerous fields of study, including history, anthropology, folklore, psychology, sociolinguistics, and communication studies, narration has embraced narrative as a research tool.⁸ The definition of narrative is

¹ Marcus Moberg, "Popular Culture and the 'Darker Side' of Alternative Spirituality: The Case of Metal Music," *Scripta Instituti Donneriani Aboensis* 21 (January 1, 2009): 130–48, <https://doi.org/10.30674/scripta.67347>.

² Kennet Granholm, "Ritual Black Metal: Popular Music as Occult Meditation and Practice," *Correspondences: Journal for the Study of Esotericism* 1, no. 1 (2013): 5–33.

³ Andrew L. Cope, *Black Sabbath and the Rise of Heavy Metal Music* (London: Routledge, 2016), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315569499>.

⁴ Michelle Phillipov, "Extreme Music for Extreme People? Norwegian Black Metal and Transcendent Violence," *Popular Music History* 6, no. 1 (May 14, 2012): 150–63, <https://doi.org/10.1558/pomh.v6i1/2.150>.

⁵ "Disenchanted Iranians Are Turning to Other Faiths," 2021, <https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2021/01/21/disenchanted-iranians-are-turning-to-other-faiths>.

⁶ Navid Fozi, *Reclaiming the Faravahar: Zoroastrian Survival in Contemporary Tehran*, Iranian Studies Series (Leiden: Leiden University Press, 2014).

⁷ Anna De Fina, "Narratives in Interview—The Case of Accounts: For an Interactional Approach to Narrative Genres," *Narrative Inquiry* 19, no. 2 (December 18, 2009): 233–58, <https://doi.org/10.1075/ni.19.2.03def>.

⁸ Catherine Kohler Riessman and Lee Quinney, "Narrative in Social Work: A Critical Review," *Qualitative Social Work* 4, no. 4 (December 2005): 391–412, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1473325005058643>.

part of a long tradition and has evolved and morphed according to the discipline. As noted by Riessman and Quinney,⁹ a narrative, according to sociolinguists, is a unit of discourse that answers one specific question and is arranged temporally. To social scientists, a personal narrative typically includes extended accounts of lives developed over multiple interviews.

Narrative analysis can be challenging and intriguing at the same time. In structured and semi-structured interviews, the researcher asks questions and receives answers with a specific research topic in mind. It is important to recognise that in the narrative approach, objectives may change or evolve throughout data collection, depending on what the narrator reveals.¹⁰ I met my interlocutors during my work on a different project. While collecting the data, the subject of mysticism and esotericism within Zoroastrianism as well as pre-Zoroastrianism came up several times. Since this theme has proven persistent and influential in their experiences and represents a new layer of Iranian music as a form of resistance, I decided to explore it further.

The interviews were conducted between 2021 and 2023 in English. Since Charuk and Magus are political refugees and have experienced trauma, establishing a trusting relationship was essential. Because narrative analysis requires the researcher to be a good listener, I ensured that the participants did not unintentionally divulge more information than they were comfortable with. I achieved this by maintaining a transparent line of communication. I often reminded them to indicate material as “off the record” whenever they believed something was not intended for public disclosure. I conducted the interviews remotely. The process was protected by secure encrypted tunnels from both ends. I then transcribed and coded the data, journaled my reflections and feelings regarding the analysis, and solicited participants’ feedback on my interpretations.¹¹

The Lure of Neopaganism in Heavy Metal

Music is innately and universally capable of inspiring and manipulating listeners. Its ability to provoke and influence has been the topic of research for quite some time. Whether it is Christian worship songs or obscure Black metal, religious and popular forms of music have always been closely related, as expressed through dialogue or conflict. According to Partridge,¹² some of the lures of popular music are directly related to the sacred, arising from its function in society, formation of groups, and class identity. Thus, music is of interest to a wide range of scholars for a multitude of reasons, and in a wide range of fields, from comparative studies to sociology, not to mention religious studies.

For Eurich,¹³ music opens a world beyond the mundane, in which a person’s identification is accepted as a new experience of the possibility of arranging it subjectively; thus “from the view of a sociology of religion, pop music has become a competitor with religion.” Eurich asserts that this experience is not only philosophical but also physiological, given that music affects our bodies. Our central nervous system is stimulated by amplifying instruments, resulting in feelings of ecstasy like those associated with mysticism. In this sense, extreme metal music is probably the most amplified, heavy, and aggressive

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Riessman and Quinney, “Narrative in Social Work,” 391–412, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1473325005058643>.

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Wendy Hollway and Tony Jefferson, *Doing Qualitative Research Differently: Free Association, Narrative and the Interview Method* (London: SAGE, 2000).

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William E. Smythe and Maureen J. Murray, “Owning the Story: Ethical Considerations in Narrative Research,” *Ethics & Behavior* 10, no. 4 (October 2000): 311–36, https://doi.org/10.1207/S15327019EB1004_1.

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Christopher H. Partridge, *The Lyre of Orpheus: Popular Music, the Sacred, and the Profane* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199751396.001.0001>.

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Johannes Eurich, “Sociological Aspects and Ritual Similarities in the Relationship between Pop Music and Religion,” *International Review of the Aesthetics and Sociology of Music* 34, no. 1 (2003): 57–70.

popular music, distinguished by aggressive and distorted guitar riffs, fast drumming, and screaming vocals. It has become extremely popular worldwide, despite its fascination with subjects that most consider dark, such as alienation, or polarising¹⁴ themes like esotericism, paganism, and Satanism.¹⁵

Furthermore, metalheads' refusal to embrace hegemonic ideologies and their possession of an ethos of freedom of expression makes religion one of the core topics of this music, with Moberg and Partridge having produced some of the most insightful research in this area. Partridge theorises that despite secularisation in the West, spiritual and paranormal interests are still popular. While some may think it trivial to look at popular music when examining the fascination with this topic, it is becoming increasingly clear that popular music can indeed contribute to socially significant constructions of the sacred and the profane.¹⁶ This point is particularly relevant to this article, since researchers who use heavy metal as a case study are frequently branded "fans" who romanticise their fandom; this is despite examples of excellent research.

Alternative religions are gaining popularity in non-Western countries, as well as in nations with religious authoritarian governments such as Iran. These religions challenge traditional practices and include new religious movements, esoteric traditions, and non-traditional spiritualities.¹⁷ Moberg¹⁸ researched how metal groups in the Nordic countries actively engage with dark alternative spiritual themes and ideas and, as a result, spread values associated with those themes and ideas within metal culture as a whole. To him, dark spiritualities are focused on individuals and their self-sacralisation and development. Furthermore, alternative spiritualities tend to place a high value on continuity with ancient traditions, such as Celtic Druidism or the pre-Christian Norse religion, accompanied by a strong sentiment against organised religion. It is here that the most extreme metal groups can be found, where the prevalent attitude is individualism and an appreciation for ancient traditions.

Manea,¹⁹ similarly to Moberg, examines how Nordic and Scandinavian bands reinvent heritage through Neopaganism. Here, I concentrate especially on the Black metal community's interest in Neopaganism, which, as Manea explains, is not confined to religious movements alone, but rather aims to reconstruct and reinterpret pre-Christian heritage. Using religion and mythology as symbolic currency to accumulate cultural capital, Black metal offers an alternative to modernity and conservative mainstream culture.

The artistic vision of Scandinavian Black metal bands reflects a fascination with pre-Christian spirituality. This phenomenon first emerged in Europe in the second half of the 1980s, especially in Norway and Sweden with bands like Bathory and Celtic Frost.²⁰ The second wave of Scandinavian Black metal (bands such as Mayhem, Burzum, Emperor, and Marduk) further embraced neopagan values and blamed Christian conversion for ending the Pagan golden era. According to their perspective, Christianity caused a rift between Europeans and their cultural and spiritual origins.²¹ Van Vikernes, who is considered one of the most prominent artists of the Black metal movement, has been convicted of multiple crimes. In 1994, he was sentenced to

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It is also worth noting that while most might consider Occultism and even Satanism as obscure themes, they tend ultimately to bring light to hidden knowledge.

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Moberg, "Popular Culture and the 'Darker Side' of Alternative Spirituality," 130–48, 110.

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Partridge, *The Lyre of Orpheus*, 7.

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W. Michael Ashcraft, *A Historical Introduction to the Study of New Religious Movements*, Routledge new religions (New York: Routledge, 2018), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315163321>.

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Moberg, "Popular Culture and the 'Darker Side' of Alternative Spirituality," 130–48.

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Elham Manea, "In the Name of Culture and Religion: The Political Function of Blasphemy in Islamic States," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 27, no. 1 (2016): 117–27, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09596410.2015.1114241>.

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Jonathan Cordero, "Unveiling Satan's Wrath: Aesthetics and Ideology in Anti-Christian Heavy Metal," *The Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* 21, no. 1 (March 2009): 1–15, <https://doi.org/10.3138/jrpc.21.1.005>.

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Miroslav Vrzal, "Pagan Terror: The Role of Pagan Ideology in Church Burnings and the 1990s Norwegian Black Metal Subculture," *Pomegranate: The International Journal of Pagan Studies* 19, no. 2 (June 9, 2017): 173–204, 174, <https://doi.org/10.1558/pome.33472>.

twenty-one years in prison for the murder of Øystein Aarseth, a rival Black metal musician, and a series of church burnings.²² While these crimes were committed by one person, they have inevitably created a negative image of the genre. Ultimately, the Norwegian Black metal bands of the 1990s were composed of teenagers who lived in a safe country without many obstacles to overcome. As Khan-Harris explains: “It seems likely that scene members were engaged in a process of one-upmanship, in which each attempted to be more transgressive than the other, therefore.”²³ The 1990s Black metal pagan “warriors” hold a significant place in the history of Scandinavia’s forgotten pagan heritage. Though many view them as a symbol of rebellion and a nod to a bygone era, I argue that their legacy has been romanticised to a great extent by their fans. Nevertheless, Black metal was an expression of resistance against conservatives; this process began in the 1980s when the pioneers sang about themes that inspired the actions perpetrated by the second wave of musicians.²⁴

Neopaganism still thrives in Western extreme heavy metal, taking on new forms of resistance against mainstream culture. Some of these more recent expressions, particularly representations of Norse mythology and heritage, have found a wider audience due to more popular cultural productions.²⁵ Extreme heavy metal engaging in Neopagan ideology is not isolated to the West. Despite little interest from scholars, it is a fascinating topic to explore. In the pages that follow, I will argue that an examination of this phenomenon within the Islamic Republic reveals intriguing patterns of Neopaganism transgressive revival.

Transgression Within the Iranian Black metal Scene: Blasphemous Neopaganism

Iranian music suffered greatly in the wake of the 1979 Islamic Revolution. Music performances, radio, and television broadcasts of foreign and Iranian music were prohibited. The official position of the regime was that non-religious music was a drug and a vice that changed people. Music, however, continued to thrive in the family circle despite all efforts to eradicate it.²⁶ All Western-style instruments (guitar, piano, percussion, etc.) were banned.²⁷ Music had to circulate in a secretive way: cassettes, video cassettes, and CDs were illegally smuggled in and purchased from illicit underground vendors, and concerts were performed privately.²⁸

In 1979, most Iranians began to live a double life, where the public and private spheres were completely different. In this atmosphere of secrecy, heavy metal bands formed underground in the early 1980s, playing mostly cover songs. The 1990s saw the rise of a scene where many bands played their music. Metal bands primarily played extreme metal genres such as thrash, death, and Black metal. In particular, Black metal musicians began to incorporate Persian musical scales, ethnic instruments, and Persian history into their lyrics.²⁹ As with Black metal musicians in Scandinavia, who felt that Christianity had cancelled their pagan traditions, Iranian Black metal musicians perceived the Islamic Revolution as the negation of their roots. This was not only a perception; in the early days of the Islamic Republic,

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Ryan Buesnel, “National Socialist Black Metal: A Case Study in the Longevity of Far-Right Ideologies in Heavy Metal Subcultures,” *Patterns of Prejudice* 54, no. 4 (August 7, 2020): 393–408, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0031322X.2020.1800987>.

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Keith Kahn-Harris, *Extreme Metal: Music and Culture on the Edge* (Oxford: Berg, 2007).

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Vrzal, “Pagan Terror,” 173–204, 182.

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Nina Urholt Nielsen, “From Black Metal to Norse Revival?: Mournfulness, Memories, and Meanings of Wardruna’s Rune Music,” in *Musikk og Religion: Tekster om Musikk i Religion og Religion i Musikk*, ed. Holm Henrik and Øivind Varkøy, Cappelen Damm Forskning, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.23865/noasp.177>.

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Ameneh Youssefzadeh, “The Situation of Music in Iran since the Revolution: The Role of Official Organizations,” *British Journal of Ethnomusicology* 9, no. 2 (2000): 35–61.

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Daniel Ahadi, “Against All Odds: Making Underground Music in Iran,” in *Phenomenology of Youth Cultures and Globalization: Lifeworlds and Surplus Meaning in Changing Times*, ed. Stuart Poyntz and Jacqueline Kennelly (New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2015).

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For example see: Pasqualina Eckerström, “Extreme Heavy Metal and Blasphemy in Iran: The Case of Confess,” *Contemporary Islam* (August 12, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11562-022-00493-7>; Laudan Nooshin, “Underground, Overground: Rock Music and Youth Discourses in Iran,” *Iranian Studies* 38, no. 3 (2005): 463–94; Mark LeVine, *Heavy Metal Islam: Rock, Resistance, and the Struggle for the Soul of Islam* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2022).

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Pasqualina Eckerström, “Resistance and Counter-Memories in Persian Black Metal,” *Journal of Middle East Politics & Policy* (March 2023).

everything that called to mind, attested to, or celebrated the pre-Islamic era was banned. For instance, Iranian publications on folklore were discontinued.³⁰

Rather than glorifying pre-Islamic Iran as the last Shah did, the Islamic Republic emphasises the Islamic civilisation and Iranians' role in Islamic history. Ferdowsi's epic poem, the *Shāhnāmeḥ*, or the Book of Kings, was rejected by the regime despite its being widely considered as a masterpiece of Persian language and literature. In addition to being the Shah's favourite epic poem, it represents what the regime wanted to erase. Parts of *Chand Dāstān-e Bargozideh az Shāhnāmeḥ*, a selection of stories from the *Shāhnāmeḥ*, were censored; for instance, certain phrases referring to "joy," "dance," "wine," and "woman" such as "and they all played music and were merry, ate and danced."³¹

The *Shāhnāmeḥ* is of particular interest here, as it is also important to adherents of Zoroastrianism, who traditionally consider it to be historical.³² In conversations with Iranian metal artists over the years, they often mention *Shāhnāmeḥ*'s historical attributes. The *Shāhnāmeḥ* covers three major Iranian dynasties: the Peshdadian, the Kayanian, and the Sasanian. Much of Zoroastrian religious history took place during the Peshdadian and Kayanian dynasties, with the biggest event being the advent of Zarathustra. For Zoroastrians, labelling this period as mere mythology negates the most important period of Zoroastrian and pre-Zoroastrian history.³³ It is, therefore, not surprising that the *Shāhnāmeḥ* has become a symbol of resistance for Iranian intellectuals and artists, since it serves as a token of what the regime has attempted to suppress.

As evidenced by the censorship/repression of the *Shāhnāmeḥ*, the regime's repressive policies are causing alienation from Islam. As Partridge notes,³⁴ there has been a noticeable trend towards spirituality, away from organised religions. The shift in recent times has meant that people are placing greater importance on personal experience rather than relying on external authority. Consequently, there has been increasing interest in esotericism and other mystical beliefs. This trend is not limited to the West alone. For instance, in Iran, there is a growing interest in minority religions as well as pagan beliefs. Zoroastrianism, in particular, is gaining popularity. Based on the 2020 survey conducted by GAMAAN, titled "Iranians' Attitudes Toward Religion," 32% of the population identifies as Shi'ite Muslim, while approximately 9% identify as atheists, 8% as Zoroastrians, 7% as spiritual, 6% as agnostic, and 5% as Sunni Muslim.³⁵ Several people support the faith because of its indigenous roots, its mystic lure, its Persian heritage, and its hostility to Islam, which they consider a foreign invasion. Even though Zoroastrians are a protected minority, this has raised concern among authorities, who continue to discriminate against them. As an example, Zoroastrian-style weddings, conducted with Persian prayers around a fire, were so popular that they were banned in 2019.³⁶ I explained above how some artists refer to Zoroastrianism not solely for religious reasons, but also as an anti-regime political stance. Intriguingly, the oldest religion has evolved into an anti-religious movement. Besides the fascination with Zoroastrianism, there is an increased interest in pre-Islamic Iranian identity mostly among Iranian youth, scholars, and intellectuals.³⁷

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Ulrich Marzolph, "Persian Popular Literature" in *Oral Literature of Iranian Languages: Kurdish, Pashto, Balochi, Ossetic, Persian and Tajik; Companion Volume II to a History of Persian Literature*, ed. Philip G Kreyenbroek and Ulrich Marzolph (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 208–364.

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Alireza Abiz, *Censorship of Literature in Post-Revolutionary Iran: Politics and Culture since 1979* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2021).

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Abbas Amanat and Farzin Vejdani, eds., *Iran Facing Others: Identity Boundaries in a Historical Perspective* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

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"Shahnameh & Stories from It," *Ramiyar Karanjia* (blog), accessed October 1, 2016, <https://ramiyar-karanjia.com/stories-from-the-shahnameh/>.

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Partridge, *The Lyre of Orpheus*, 113, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199751396.001.0001>.

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Ammar Maleki and Pooyan Tamimi Arab, "Iranians' Attitudes Toward Religion: A 2020 Survey Report," The Group for Analyzing and Measuring Attitudes in IRAN (GAMAAN), 2020, <https://gamaan.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/GAMAAN-Iran-Religion-Survey-2020-English.pdf>.

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"Disenchanted Iranians Are Turning to Other Faiths," *The Economist* (January 21, 2021), https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2021/01/21/disenchanted-iranians-are-turning-to-other-faiths?utm_medium=cpc.adword.pd&utm_source=google&ppccampaignID=18151738051&ppcadID=&utm_campaign=a.22brand_pmax&utm_content=conversion.direct-response.anonymous&gad_source=1&gclid=EAIaIQobChMI_JrPprW3hgMVmBqiAx-1duwKxEAAAYASAAEgIrnFD_BwE&gclsrc=aw.ds.

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Navid Fozi, *Reclaiming the Faravahar*, 172.

As we will discuss in more detail later, Iranian extreme metal bands, especially Black metal musicians, derive inspiration from ancient pre-Islamic practices, composing songs inspired by Iranian folklore. Detached from rigid rules, musicians and fans seek what Partridge defines as a “pagan active space” and an “affective space,”³⁸ mental zones in which people can reflect and are encouraged to act in certain ways. Zoroastrianism is significant to many Iranian metalheads in their quest for spaces of freedom. It represents a rejection of the religious regulations imposed by the authorities and a pursuit of what has been suppressed since 1979.

Due to this phenomenon, as well as the advocacy for pre-Islamic heritage, Black metal is considered one of the most dangerous musical styles in the country. Despite the risks, however, a scene developed around musicians who from the start have been aware that they may face persecution, and who have in fact faced severe consequences, including being charged and prosecuted for blasphemy or apostasy. Magus and Charuk are just two of the many metal musicians who have faced such persecution.

Material Transgression for Social Change

Now that I have identified the use of Neopaganism in both Western and Iranian Black metal, it is important to define what I mean by transgression. Any form of heavy metal, including the most extreme, is no longer considered transgressive in most secular countries. Although these forms may be construed as provocative, they do not violate any laws.³⁹ In its most basic sense, transgression means exceeding or crossing a boundary or limit. Generally, these limits are established by laws, rules, and social norms that are formulated, maintained, and justified by different political organisations or institutions. This results in relying on these institutions while opposing them.⁴⁰ Therefore, transgression depends on the context in which it occurs. Transgressions are not universal; rather, they depend on the country and socio-legal system in which they are committed.

According to Kahn-Harris, Western extreme metal is provocative, although metalheads refute the implications of their actions when questioned about their ideologies. Kahn-Harris describes this behaviour as “reflexive anti-reflexivity,”⁴¹ which refers to the reluctance of Black metal enthusiasts to acknowledge the genre’s connection with, for instance, political implications. My experience as a musical journalist has allowed me to observe this behaviour. Many Western Black metal bands are provocative, yet when asked about their actions, they “play innocent.” Despite ripping a bible apart onstage minutes before, when interviewed, many bands claim to be purely about music and not about politics or religion. On the other hand, Iranian musicians proudly claim their transgressive acts as forms of institutional and social criticism.

Additionally, distinguishing provocation from transgression is important here, in my opinion, since the provocative act of a Black metal band in secular countries is protected by the principle of freedom of expression. By contrast, in Iran, the same act is considered blasphemy and is punishable by law.⁴² Paradoxically, religiously authoritarian

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Christopher Partridge, “Emotion, Meaning and Popular Music,” in *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Religion and Popular Music*, ed. Marcus Moberg and Christopher Partridge (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2017), 23–31.

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Keith Kahn-Harris, *Extreme Metal: Music and Culture on the Edge* (Oxford: Berg, 2007).

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Ted Gornellos and David J. Gunkel, *Transgression 2.0: Media, Culture, and the Politics of a Digital Age* (London: Continuum International Publishing, 2011), <http://grail.eblib.com.au/patron/FullRecord.aspx?p=831519>.

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Keith Kahn-Harris, *Extreme Metal*, 145.

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Eckerström, “Extreme Heavy Metal and Blasphemy in Iran,” <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11562-022-00493-7>.

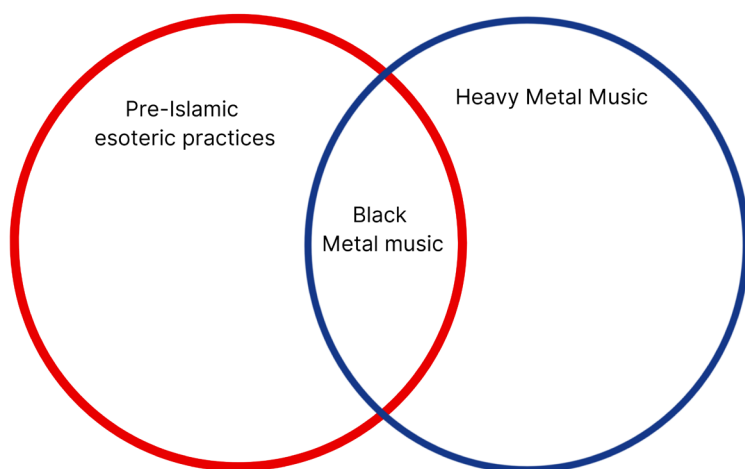
countries fail to limit transgressive acts by imposing harsh penalties. As Gandolfo⁴³ explains: “The transgression of limits is not something society seeks to avoid by imposing and enforcing taboos; being dialectically inextricable from taboo, transgression, or at least the threat of it, ensures that we remain engaged with what lies beyond the prohibition, exceeding it but not destroying it.”

There is a long history of theoretical discussion regarding this paradoxical relationship between limits and transgression. The topic of transgression is perhaps best known from the work of Georges Bataille. In his view, exceeding limits arises from the desire to “complete” life;⁴⁴ in its paradoxical manifestation, disobedience strengthens limits, since it reinforces concerns about rules when they are violated.⁴⁵ Echoing Bataille, Michel Foucault states that this strange relationship is inextricably linked to the idea that, if a limit cannot be crossed, then it does not exist, and the existence of transgression has no meaning.⁴⁶

It is worth noting that I documented the results of my analysis during the Woman, Life, Freedom protests in Iran. These protests showcase the determination and longing of those living under oppressive laws to push boundaries. In Iran, actions such as removing the veil and creating music that is deemed blasphemous are considered forms of “material transgression,” which are non-violent. As Joke Hermes and Annette Hill state,⁴⁷ material transgressions can even be understood as supporting rather than threatening societal needs. As well as challenging power and norms, transgression can also revive moral frames discursively and materially. While some might perceive breakdowns as negative, they might lead to positive outcomes.

The analysis will reveal that Iranian Black metal musicians transgress in using pre-Islamic esotericism in search of social change; that is, a country where freedom of expression and religion prevail. Furthermore, using two criminalised tools, pre-Islamic esoteric practices and heavy metal, they create a unique double transgressive tool, as I visualise below (Fig. 1).

Double transgression of Iranian black metal bands



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Fig. 1. Double transgression of Iranian Black metal bands.

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Jörg Plöger, review of *The City at Its Limits: Taboo, Transgression, and Urban Renewal in Lima*, by Daniella Gandolfo, *Journal of Latin American Studies* 42, no. 4 (November 2010): 881–83, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022216X10001604>.

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Chris Jenks, *Transgression, Key Ideas* (London: Routledge, 2003).

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Georges Bataille, *Erotism: Death & Sensuality* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1986).

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Michel Foucault, “A Preface to Transgression,” in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1980), 29–52, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781501741913-003>.

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Joke Hermes and Annette Hill, “Transgression in Contemporary Media Culture,” *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 24, no. 1 (January 2021): 3–14, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367877920968105>.

Magus and Charuk: Persecuted Shamans

Magus's father was a Zoroastrian from Iran, while his mother was Israeli⁴⁸ and Pagan. His parents died as a result of the Iran-Iraq conflict, which lasted from 1980 to 1988, leaving him an orphan. Thus, he lived with relatives, mostly Zoroastrians, yet he had the opportunity to experience different religious settings, as he narrates:

“My father was Zoroastrian, I lived in different tribes, and I witnessed these tribes who live simply. I experienced different cultures. I felt like a tourist. I was in religious and super modern families, who had music in their homes. I started to compare these cultures, from the extreme to the modern. I took the best from all of it.”

As a result, he immersed himself in studies of Mithraism, Zurvanism, and local Buddhist traditions.⁴⁹ This combined with his love for music, as Magus explains:

“In my projects, we concentrate on two levels: one is the ancient and the second against the current religion, society, and politics. We critique the current religion and politics because we see that it's chaos, so we don't want it for the next generation. Because of my family heritage, I had vinyl of the golden era of Persian music and those are fascinating, complicated, and beautiful harmonies and opera too. That combination makes my music now.”

He combined this Persian folk music with the harshness of heavy metal, which he discovered thanks to popular illegal sellers, who offered what was considered Western music, including metal. “I combined the harshness I got from these tapes and the classical Persian music, and I started to cover it in funeral doom style.”⁵⁰ Metal music came with a price. Magus was arrested multiple times while playing his music: “You accept it, you get arrested, a few lashes and it's fine!,” he states. For instance, he was arrested with his band Tears of Fire at the Ziggurat at Chogha Zanbil when he and his group were invited to play at a Zoroastrian celebration.

One of the most serious arrests was during the last installation of his group Warrior of Peace, at the Reza Abbasi Museum. The exhibition was sponsored by the Cultural Heritage and Touristic Organization, the Organization for Defending Victims of Violence, and the United Nations of Iran.⁵¹ Despite this, the police stopped the exhibition and arrested Magus. He was brutally abused by the guards for multiple days. Once out he fled the country, reaching India as a political refugee, and eventually Germany.

Charuk met Magus in India. She also had to escape from Iran. Born into an Azeri family, she was raised by her parents as a pagan in secret, to avoid the risk of persecution. She grew up in an environment where music and dance were taken very seriously and used to perform rituals, as she explains:

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Acknowledging the sensitive nature of some passages of the narration, I refrained from asking for details that were not directly relevant to my research inquiry.

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Pasqualina Eckerström and Titus Hjelm, “The Unintended Consequences of State-Enforced Religion: ‘Blasphemous’ Metal Music as Secondary Deviation in Iran,” *Religion* (February 19, 2024), <https://doi.org/10.1080/0048721X.2024.2316158>.

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Funeral doom is a sub-genre of doom metal. Funeral doom's tempos tend to be slower, conveying a sense of sorrow and depression. Vocals can range from growls to melodic singing.

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Eckerström and Hjelm, “The Unintended Consequences of State-Enforced Religion.”

“There is a double world in Iran, my family had to obey the society on the surface, for example when you go out you have to cover, you have to act conservative, and talk conservative. But when I entered my home, there were completely other rules. You just take off everything. My father was a traveller, and my mother was working with the theatre. We had seasonal ceremonies and rituals with dance and music. I was brought up as a musician to perform in those kinds of ceremonies, to entertain and to make people dance.”

This environment that nurtured art as an essential spiritual ritual impacted Charuk immensely. She developed a purpose, which left her free to set out on a path of discovery, as she describes below:

“I became aware/conscious and eventually I practised to become the living existence of what was hidden, suppressed or simply unconscious so to remember what has been dismembered. These hidden particles of ultimate self are like pieces of a puzzle, the complete image of who I am, and I’m going toward, or better to say inward, to fulfil and put the scattered pieces together. This awakening process only can be achieved by hard work of body-mind-energy, a multi-disciplinary approach to push the limits, which are the constructed fears that black the vision. Every time I’m on stage, it’s an initiation and celebration of the complete self. I’m not delivering information of sounds but the experience of being a complete self. This is associated with Zen, Chán, Jān,⁵² the pre-Zoroastrian practice of becoming one and none. The instant realisation that time is an illusion, not thinking but becoming timeless. In this state the outer world is like a blurry mirror to collect information and the actual vibrating world truly exists and manifests where I stand. I’m the centre of this axis . . . In this manner every human being, every living being, is a world, but not everyone spins on their centre where the most powerful and unbeatable generator of energy resides. The collision of these focused masses together can create what was once called magic. I’m the practitioner of this discipline, and my performances are the rituals where I revive this ancient technique, by being in a timeless and spaceless state of Jān. I become the ancient shaman and together with Magus, another spinning world shaman, our music becomes the tool to relocate everyone else in their centre and create a mass of worlds spinning and therefore magic happens.”

Charuk was trained as a classical musician and has a deep understanding of how art can impact one’s body and soul. She used all her money to open a school of music and psychology:

“For eight years we worked there, and we built a choir and orchestra. It was a very revolutionary thing to do because in Iran we only had two orchestras, one national and one philharmonic. Because in Iran, every artistic activity should be under the law of the government. This was an underground centre. So

many musicians and artists from all over Iran came over there and we created a network. We decided to not ask for a license because in this school we did not want to obey the Islamic Law. We had no veil and both women and male were together. This in Iran is forbidden.”

Eventually, the school was reported by a Muslim neighbour, as Charuk recalls:

“They lied and said it was a whorehouse. The police collected the testimonies and took them to the court. They closed the place after eight years of activity and they sealed it. I lost my money, and for three years I was isolated in my home. I had nothing. I lost everything that I built and I had an open case now. While I was isolated at home, I wrote a poem book about the feminine energy sensations. I can say it was erotic in some ways. So, when I decided to send it to a publication I faced some troubles for that also.”

Charuk understood she was in danger of being arrested any day. She left Iran and travelled to Turkey, Armenia, and eventually India, where she met Magus.

Performance as an Ancient Temple: Ecstasy-inducing Mantras and Sounds

Charuk and Magus have several musical projects together, such as Darkestrah, epic Black metal with folk influences; Nashmeh, folk Black metal; Paganland/Sarmoung Ensemble, a native folk metal band based on ancient wisdom; and Mogh, Black metal. Their music features aggressive guitars they fuel with acoustic instruments. As Magus states:

“I heard from our audience that if they knew what we were playing, they would have taken acid because we create such an atmosphere that takes the soul of people. That’s our purpose, we play acoustic instruments that have a special tuning not amplified and we mix them with electronic ones. We recreate a theatre. In ancient times there was no electricity and after the Industrial Revolution, we have extra waves and fields in our bodies and minds that destroyed our energy. Then we use for example the natural skin drum which has a different sound from the modern drum kit. When your body hears the natural skin drum it just affects your heartbeat and makes it very effective rather than the e.g., a metal drum.”

Charuk describes their stage as a Mithraeum temple:

“Our stage is no different from the ancient Mithraeum temple dedicated to practising this mass transformation, where we are not separated lonely individuals wandering, pursuing our ego, but we unite worlds together with elements of nature, fire, water, earth, and air, being part of the cosmic order ASHA,

RTHA. Each play a powerful role to shape the destiny of the whole.”

While this is true for all their projects, here I will concentrate especially on the Paganland/Sarmoung Ensemble (Fig. 2) because Charuk and Magus mentioned it several times in our conversations. The group describes it as “a shamanic Iranian band based in Berlin who believe in bringing life to ancient sounds and rites by their narrative music performed by Persian primitive and rustic oriental instruments and movements.”⁵³ Everything in their performance is combined to reach an ancient state of ecstasy,⁵⁴ as Magus explains: “For example, we use the singing bowl, as it’s known today, but in the original wisdom it was used to extract liquid from the roots. The liquid was mixed with milk and blood, water, and salt. This made such a unique elixir. From a medical tool, it turned to an instrument.”



Fig. 2. Promotional photo of the Paganland/Sarmoung Ensemble.

Furthermore, they use mantras, based on the five Old Avestan *Gāthās*, also known as “hymns.” They are a collection of liturgical texts, typically ascribed to Zarathustra and composed by Iranians living in the north of modern Afghanistan, probably in the first half of the second millennium BCE. They are the core texts of Zoroastrianism.⁵⁵ As Magus explains: “It’s all lyrics, songs so it’s a text with sounds if we look at it from a modern point of view. There is a musical note within the musical text. The melody and the drum are already in the text. It’s so interesting to me. Was he a musician? How was he able to write texts that have music and intonation?”

Through research and contact with experts, each song is based on this written note in the language. Furthermore, using acoustic folk instruments and focusing on mantras instead of contemporary lyrics lets Magus and Charuk reach out to a listener’s soul and create a meditative state. As Charuk explains:

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Paganland (Sarmoung Ensemble), accessed April 7, 2024, <https://paganlandsarmoungensemble.bandcamp.com>.

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I had the opportunity to attend a concert in Turku, Finland in 2024. I witnessed not only how they achieved a sense of unity within the band but also the impact it had on their audience. The musicians managed to captivate even those from distant cultures, creating a unique experience that one might define as an ecstatic musical state.

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Prods Oktor Skjærvø, “The *Gathas*, a Forgotten Masterpiece,” in *A Companion to World Literature*, ed. Ken Seignourie (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2019), 1–13, <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118635193.ctw10020>.

“This perspective is long rooted in ancient Iranian esotericism, which also manifests itself in mystic writings/poems as well as practical rituals such as the whirling dance where one creates the whirlwind of energy by spinning on a centre of their axis, bending the defined laws of existence and common belief system and stepping beyond the limits.”

The whirling dance, as mentioned by Charuk, has its roots in the tradition of mysticism. Some scholars believe that its origins are linked to the cult of Mithra;⁵⁶ a similar ritual is known as Sufi whirling or Sama, through which Sufis attain a state of spiritual ecstasy, seeking a union with the divine.⁵⁷ Furthermore, despite dancing being condemned by the Regime, it is still an important ritual among Iranian Zoroastrians that is used to educate young people about Zoroastrian ethics and rituals.⁵⁸

One of the core ideas permeating through Magus and Charuk is the importance of feminine energy. To Magus, this is imperative and as such Charuk is fundamental to his art: “Whatever you talk about, from Satanism, spiritualism, occultism, esotericism, you name it, everything comes from female energy. We have many evidences.” To Magus, while Islam undermines the role of women, ancient Persian teachings instead celebrate strong women figures. For instance, he often mentions Shatana as one of the inspirations for his music. Shatana is one of the most important figures in the entire Nart saga. These tales are an integral part of the mythology of many tribes, such as the Abazin, the Abkhaz, the Circassian, the Ossetian, and the Karachay-Balkar. Thus, it is not surprising that both Magus and Charuk consider this figure as the ultimate symbol of woman power. As Magus notes: “That’s the person who can bring the warrior child. She was powerful! In our history we have queens who were ruling the empire. We have a lot of strong women examples.” According to Charuk, Islam fears women:

“Women are more connected in natural roots. They have powerful sensations, and intuitions. Women can create things that are very powerful. Islam is totally against women and women in power mostly. The Qur’an says you have to beat women when they are not obeying you. You have to cover women and they have to stay home. They shouldn’t work outside and so on. I don’t say that in Iran women are staying at home. For sure they are going outside and working and educating themselves and all that, but still in a very restricted framework.”

Magus and Charuk celebrate Shatana, as a symbol of the power of womanhood that is a constant presence in their music. The focus on the strength of womanhood is especially intriguing in Iran, as discrimination against women has persisted in various fields, including the music industry. It is currently forbidden for female musicians in Iran to perform solo. After the Iranian Revolution, many well-known Iranian singers were forced to flee their country. Others had to resort to unorthodox means of earning a living, such as disguising their voices to sound like children and performing for children’s programmes.⁵⁹ Fur-

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Mohsen Zahabi, “Reflection of Martial Arts in the Iranian Performing Arts,” *SCIREA Journal of Sociology* 8 (March 5, 2024): 90–115, <https://doi.org/10.54647/sociology841266>.

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June-Ann Greeley, “Sufi Turning and the Spirituality of Sacred Space,” *Journal for the Study of Spirituality* 12, no. 2 (July 3, 2022): 108–19, <https://doi.org/10.1080/20440243.2022.2126138>.

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Abdolhossein Daneshvarinasab, Melasutra Md Dali, and Mohd Yaacob, “The Contribution of Leisure to Religious Continuity among the Zoroastrians,” *Anthropological Notebooks* 21 (January 1, 2015): 61–81.

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Armaghan Fakhraeirad, “The Female Voice of Iran,” *Ethnomusicology* 67, no. 3 (October 1, 2023): 482–84, <https://doi.org/10.5406/21567417.67.3.16>.

thermore, learning from the teaching of ancient tales, they currently promote unity between men and women to reappropriate the harmony that, to them, the Islamic Republic has destroyed. The description for the album “Naart Kaachitaa,” (Fig. 3) recorded with their project Paganland/Sarmoung Ensemble and published in 2022, shows that the musicians, while far away from their country, are in tune with what the Iranian population has felt since 1979. This is how they describe the album on their Bandcamp webpage:⁶⁰

“For many centuries the stories of Shahnameh and Nar in Iran-shahr were part of our small or big ceremonies depicting heroes, raising our inner strength and keeping our minds awake. Today the Iranian revolution against the most hideous beasts is the new Shahnameh filled with myth of people who have been raised from the stories raised like Phoenix from the ashes to once again bring the fire of a thousand years. We dedicate this musical piece to all the tears that shall become rivers, blood that shall irrigate the land, and unity of men and women that shall offer a newborn as a god who is nothing but a powerful awakened human . . . *Naart Kaachitaa* is a collection of Musical Tales inspired by the oldest Shahnameh, the Book of Kings called ‘Stories of Nar’ from the now Ossetian region in the Caucasus. The Music is a Narration based on Allanian Text, Scythian Breathing Techniques, and Sarmatian Healing Methods.”

Here they call for the rise of men and women against the Iranian authorities. In the same year, 2022, the protest movement “Woman, Life, Freedom” in Iran witnessed a remarkable show of solidarity from people hailing from different religious backgrounds and gender identities, all coming together to demand their basic rights and freedoms from the authorities.⁶¹

These musicians have one goal within their music: to share their deep knowledge of the ancient heritage. As Magus states, he uses esotericism within Zoroastrianism and pre-Zoroastrianism to find that “the unique inner path with an inheritance of ancient maps/technic is endarkening.”

Conclusion

This study is emic in nature, as I aimed to understand the cultural beliefs, values, and practices from the perspective of the participants themselves.⁶² Magus and Charuk understand pre-Islamic teachings, such as Zoroastrianism and pre-Zoroastrianism, as leading to the use of music as a sacred form of expression. These teachings highly value free expression and recognise the inherent strengths of women. Magus’s “inner path” is both spiritual and cultural, emphasising the importance of discovering spirituality on one’s own instead of simply following imposed teaching. This path stands in opposition to the societal norms imposed by the Islamic Republic.

As a result of their Zoroastrian and pagan upbringing, Charuk and Magus found power in legends, history, and beliefs that the Islamic Republic had eradicated. They aim to gain and share insights



Fig. 3. Album *Naart Kaachitaa* by Paganland (Sarmoung Ensemble).

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“Naart Kaachitaa, by Paganland (Sarmoung Ensemble),” Paganland (Sarmoung Ensemble), accessed April 7, 2024, <https://paganlandsarmoungensemble.bandcamp.com/album/naart-kaachitaa>.

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Arastoo Dabiri, “‘Woman, Life, Freedom’: A Movement in Progress in Iran,” *Dignity: A Journal of Analysis of Exploitation and Violence* 8, no. 1 (March 1, 2023), <https://doi.org/10.23860/dignity.2023.08.01.05>.

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Madhu Bala, G. R. B. Chalil, and Amit Gupta, “Emic and Etic: Different Lenses for Research in Culture; Unique Features of Culture in Indian Context,” *Management and Labour Studies* 37, no. 1 (February 2012): 45–60, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0258042X1103700105>.

from the pre-Islamic spiritual heritage through their music. As a result, they find themselves on an esoteric path to discover and share “special knowledge”⁶³ found within these traditions. In doing so, they have risked their lives and been forced to leave their home, never to return. Nonetheless, their unwavering commitment to advocating for the inheritance they hold dear has persisted.

Furthermore, Charuk and Magus represent what Russell⁶⁴ refers to as one of the esoteric aspects of Zoroastrianism, the belief that spiritually advanced believers employing mystical techniques might acquire special knowledge and revelations already described in the Gathas, where mantra recitations are used to induce these revelations.

What is interesting is that, as Aspren and Strube⁶⁵ observe, “deviant” and “anti-establishment” forms of knowledge are frequently connected by esoteric scholars. In the case of Iran, esoteric practices considered pagan are defined in law as deviant. As a result, young people are even more inclined to engage in Paganism. For example, during the ongoing Iranian protests, on the occasion of Chaharshanbe Suri, a celebration with Zoroastrian roots that involves jumping over a fire, young protesters took to the streets and chanted anti-government slogans.⁶⁶ The regime warned against it. Consequently, the commander of the Greater Tehran Police Force, Abbas Ali Mohammadian, said police officers would use mosques for arrests⁶⁷ because the Islamic hardliners view the national tradition as a pagan relic. The regime kept their promise: more than 50 people were arrested, at least 19 people died, and 2,800 were injured.⁶⁸ Echoing Bataille and Foucault’s understanding of transgression and limit as interviewed, the risks of severe consequences did not deter people from celebrating this event, also known as the “Festival of Fire.” It is evident that pre-Islamic heritage is still prevalent in Iran, and some Iranians use pre-Islamic esotericism to transgress against the regime. This is particularly prominent in the extreme Iranian metal music scene. For example, Sina, a Black metal musician from the Wasteland, was forced to migrate to Norway because he risked being arrested. His music is entirely influenced by Zoroastrian tales.⁶⁹

The members of Arsames, another metal band who celebrates the pre-Islamic heritage, were arrested in 2020;⁷⁰ Akvan/نوکا, Black metal has produced several albums on the same topic, and the band Jawzael produces music concentrating on occult and esotericism.

Neopaganism is a contemporary movement that seeks to revive the practices and beliefs of ancient religions, often incorporating modern elements. Iranian extreme metal bands provide a notable example of this trend by promoting the revival of pre-Islamic history and esotericism. However, this phenomenon remains largely unexplored beyond Western borders due to the secrecy of practitioners and the severe consequences they face, including imprisonment or even death. Nonetheless, it is possible to gain insight into this hidden world. This study illuminates the crucial role that popular culture plays in shaping religious and cultural evolution.

Studying religion and popular culture offers perspectives on how religion can function outside of traditional institutional settings, which is one of its major contributions.⁷¹ Moreover, as Partridge observes, popular culture such as music matters in religious experiences: “We

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Egil Aspren, “Reverse-Engineering ‘esotericism’: How to Prepare a Complex Cultural Concept for the Cognitive Science of Religion,” *Religion* 46, no. 2 (2016): 158–85. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0048721X.2015.1072589>.

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James R. Russell, “On Mysticism and Esotericism among the Zoroastrians,” *Iranian Studies* 26, no. 1–2 (1993): 73–94. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00210869308701787>.

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Egil Aspren and Julian Strube, *New Approaches to the Study of Esotericism*, Supplements to Method & Theory in the Study of Religion, vol. 17 (Leiden: Brill, 2021).

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Babak Dehghanpisheh, “Iranians Use Fire Festival to Revive Anti-Government Protests,” *The Washington Post* (March 14, 2023), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/03/14/iran-protests-fire-festival-chaharshanbe-suri/>.

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“Tehran Police Warn Against Protests Ahead Of ‘Festival Of Fire,’” *Iran Wire* (March 13, 2023), <https://iranwire.com/en/news/114729-tehran-police-warns-against-protests-ahead-of-festival-of-fire/>.

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“Iran’s Fire Festival Claims 19 Deaths and 2,800 Injuries,” *Iran International* (May 15, 2023), <https://www.iranintl.com/en/202203166806>.

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Eckerström, “Resistance and Counter-Memories in Persian Black Metal.”

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Robert Pasbani, “Iranian Band Arsames Escape Their Country after Being Sentenced to 15 Years for Playing Metal,” *Metal Injection* (August 14, 2020), <https://metalinjection.net/news/metal-band-arsames-escape-from-iran-after-being-sentenced-to-15-years-in-prison?path=news/metal-band-arsames-escape-from-iran-after-being-sentenced-to-15-years-in-prison>.

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Egil Aspren and Granholm Kennet, *Contemporary Esotericism* (London: Routledge, 2014), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315728650>.

can be moved by the Orphic power of their art to such an extent that the encounter becomes invested with a particular significance for which religious language seems peculiarly appropriate.⁷² Today, occult and esoteric symbolism is often used for aesthetic or superficial reasons in extreme heavy metal, particularly Black metal.⁷³ The complexities of the situation in Iran cannot be ignored, as the symbols utilised in protests are intentionally designed to push against and challenge those in power. Music plays a vital role in the country's culture of dissent, as songs often embody a powerful message of resistance and protest. Without fail, each protest in Iran is accompanied by a song that serves as a unifying anthem for the movement. The use of music and poetry to convey subversive meanings is a longstanding tradition in Iran's history, dating back to pre-Islamic times. Music has been revered as a therapeutic medium for centuries.⁷⁴ In response, the Regime has attempted to cancel these practices. Interestingly, popular culture, particularly music, provides evidence of alternative spirituality in Iran. Musicians have traditionally resisted Islamic control and performed their music in secret. Due to the secretive nature of these practices, the association of esotericism with hidden knowledge in Iran takes on a new level of meaning. Thus, much more research is called for. It would be beneficial for future research to examine the perceptions of Zoroastrian metal music among Zoroastrians, particularly Iranians, with a specific focus on those who currently reside in Iran. It is worthwhile to investigate whether there is any opposition from traditionalist groups towards the concept of Zoroastrian metal.

Acknowledgement

Dedicated to the courageous people of Iran. Your bravery and resilience are an inspiration to us all.

Funding Details and Disclosure Statement and Conflict of Interest

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors. I declare no conflicts of interest.

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